

## Bear Encounters

“Bear injures Hiker” – that’s a headline no one likes to see.

It is so much worse when it happens in our area.

Bear attacks are rare. On average only one or two people are killed by bears – grizzlies and black bears – in the United States each year. In Yellowstone National Park and the Yellowstone Ecosystem, only eight deaths have been caused by bears in the past 150 years. People are more likely to be killed by dogs – 25 per year – or lightning – 90 per year – than by bears in the United States.

But as rare as a grizzly bear attack is, people who hike, hunt or recreate in bear country need to know what to do in case of an encounter. First, they need to understand some bear behavior. Bears are opportunistic, intelligent and very curious. They are not unpredictable. They only seem that way to someone who doesn’t understand their behavior.

The most important things to a bear are food, breeding and personal space. The size of their personal space varies depending on the bear, season, food availability. They will defend that space.

Grizzlies evolved in open country where there was little to no place to hide so often act aggressively when threatened. Whereas black bears evolved in forested country and could easily slip away so they tend to flee when threatened.

If you encounter a bear, first assess the situation. How close is the bear and is the bear aware of your presence? What is the bear’s behavior and what is its motivation?

If the bear is a good distance away and is unaware of you:

- Maintain or increase your distance.
- Assess the situation further, note wind direction, identify the bear.
- Observe and learn.
- Decide whether to alert the bear to your presence depending on direction of travel.
- Detour or retreat if necessary to avoid the bear.

If the bear is close and unaware of you:

- Increase your distance slowly, watching the bear.

- Assess further, note wind direction, identify the bear.
- Alert the bear to your presence if necessary, but don't startle it.
- Retreat then detour if necessary to avoid the bear.

If the bear is close and attentive or curious:

- Stand your ground – don't run.
- Let the bear know you're human – talk calmly, wave your arms.
- Group together – if in a group.
- Assess further, note wind, identify the bear, determine its motivation.
- Increase your distance slowly, watching the bear.
- If the bear approaches, stop and stand your ground again.
- Retreat when the bear moves away or no longer approaches.
- Detour or retreat.

If the bear is close and defensive, because of young, food or personal space:

- Stand your ground, don't run.
- Talk calmly.
- Use placating postures, avoid eye contact, face sideways.
- Assess the situation and identify the bear.
- Try to increase the distance slowly, watching the bear.
- If the bear approaches, stop and stand your ground again.
- Retreat when the bear moves away or no longer approaches.

If the bear charges:

- Stand your ground. Don't run. Bears often bluff charge and will stop short or run past you. The bear may even charge several times before leaving the area.
- Use your bear pepper spray if you have it.
- When the charge ends, and the bear moves away, attempt to retreat.
- If the bear approaches again, stop and stand your ground.
- Retreat when the bear moves away and no longer approaches.

If the bear makes contact and you have identified it as a grizzly:

- Drop to the ground and play dead.
- Lie flat on your stomach with your hands clasped behind your head protecting your head.
- Keep your legs slightly apart with toes dug into the ground, this will help keep you from being rolled over.
- If the bear does roll you over, continue to roll until you are on your stomach again.
- If you have a pack on – keep it on for added protection.

Grizzly attacks are usually over in seconds. Continue to play dead until the bear has left the area. Moving before then could provoke another attack.

If the attack becomes prolonged, or if the bear starts to eat you, then the bear is no longer acting defensively and is now non-defensive or predatory. In this situation, fight back with everything you have. You are literally fighting for your life. Use your deterrent or defensive weapons.

If the bear that has made contact with you is a black bear:

- Always fight back – you are fighting for your life.
- Use your deterrent or defensive weapons.
- Do not play dead.

If a non-defensive bear – may be curious, aggressive or in very rare cases, predatory – approaches:

- Stand your ground, don't run.
- Be aggressive –
  - Wave your arms.
  - Shout.
  - Stomp your feet.
  - Throw objects.
  - Pound a stick on the ground.
  - Stand higher, on a rock or log.
  - Use your deterrent.
- Continue to be aggressive until the bear leaves.

- Attempt to retreat.
- If the bear approaches again, stand your ground and continue to be aggressive.

Treat any bear that enters your camp or dwelling as a non-defensive bear. Be aggressive. Treat any bear that enters your tent while you're in it as a predatory attack. Fight back!

Knowledge is power. You are in control of the situation. Be aware of what you are communicating to the bear during an encounter. Are you predator or prey? Be prepared to change with the situation as it unfolds.

Let the bear know you're human:

- Don't run.
- Don't climb a tree.
- Don't bend over or kneel down.
- Don't drop your pack or food.
- Don't play dead to a black bear.

So who can remember all this, and what if you make a mistake? Bears are actually quite tolerant and are more concerned with their own safety than hurting you. By doing the right things, we increase our chances of walking away from an encounter unharmed.

People live in or visit bear country do not have to fear bears. Remember, knowing what to do in an encounter will provide you with the tools you need if ever you should find yourself face to face with one of these awesome animals.

Have a fun and bear safe summer.

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